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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [EU](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: EU MOVES -- SLOWLY -- AFTER BLOCKED LABOR  
CONFERENCE

Classified By: CDA David Ballard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In early September, the GOT blocked a prominent international NGO conference on labor and employment issues, ostensibly because the organizers had not given the GOT advance notification. Privately, GOT officials made clear to the organizers, who included European NGOs, a Spanish trade union, and the official Tunisian trade union, that the GOT took issue with the participation of two Tunisian activists and that the conference could have gone forward in their absence. The EU and the member states involved in this effort are protesting the GOT's action, both in Tunis and in Brussels. End Summary.

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Conference Blocked  
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¶2. (C) According to numerous sources, the GOT blocked the "International Conference on Employment and the Right to Work in the Euro-Mediterranean Region", which had been scheduled for September 8-9 in Tunis. The conference had been organized by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, the Euromed Trade Union Forum, and the Fundacion Paz y Solidaridad of the Spanish Comisiones Obreras trade union in liaison with the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT). The conference was to have included 70 participants from some 15 countries. The Spanish Foreign Ministry's Agency for International Cooperation financially supported the conference, which was to be the culmination of a three-year Euromed Employment research project. Two previous meetings were held in Morocco and Jordan.

¶3. (C) In press interviews, Friedrich Ebert Foundation official Ralf Melzer said that on September 6, representatives of the Tunis hotel which had been reserved for the event told the organizers that the hotel air conditioning had broken down, and they would not be able to hold the conference there. Organizers reportedly told hotel managers that the group would manage without air conditioning, but the hotel refused. Conference organizers subsequently sought permission from "dozens of hotels in the greater Tunis area" to hold the conference, but were similarly denied. According to Melzer, one hotel employee admitted that the hotels had received a notice from the Ministry of Tourism forbidding them to host the participants or the meeting. Finally, the UGTT allowed delegates that had

begun to arrive for the conference to stay at the UGTT-owned Hotel Amilcar, but emphasized no formal meeting could take place. Conference organizers met only briefly with participants in the hotel lobby to explain that the conference had been canceled.

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Why Was it Blocked?  
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¶4. (C) In a September 27 meeting with Charge on other issues (septel) Finnish DCM Krista Napoli, who was at the Hotel Amilcar when would-be participants were informed of the cancellation of the conference, said the venue was full of plain-clothes police. According to Napoli, Tunisian government officials offered to let the conference take place, as long as two specific Tunisian participants -- Khemais Chammari, a prominent critic of the Ben Ali regime, and Habib Guiza, a UGTT labor activist who recently briefed Emboffs on his plans to start a breakaway union -- did not participate. The European organizers refused the offer outright. Napoli said that the organizers tried in vain to find another venue in Tunisia for the confab.

¶5. (C) According to European Commission DCM Bernard Philippe, the Europeans remain befuddled over the GOT's motivation in blocking the conference, since it was to have focused on jobs -- "the issue which is at the center of the partnership we are trying to build." Moreover, according to Napoli, conference organizers had invited three Tunisian cabinet ministers, one of whom had confirmed his participation. Another high-ranking Tunisian official (NFI) had sent a letter conveying his best wishes for the success of the conference. (Note: Press reports quote Melzer as saying

that three Tunisian ministers had been invited to attend and had accepted, only canceling at the last minute. End Note.)

¶6. (C) Offering a slightly different perspective, Marc Shade-Poulsen, another conference organizer -- from the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, suggested that Tunisian Interior Ministry officials had decided that they "did not want to see trade unionists and human rights people together." He dismissed the MOI claim, oft-repeated in the media, that the Friedrich Ebert Foundation had failed to submit advance notification of the conference, including an agenda, documents, and a list of participants, in order to obtain an appropriate permit for the conference. (NOTE: So do we. It's more than ridiculous. There is no requirement to submit any of that in the first place. END NOTE).

¶7. (C) UGTT secretary-general Mohammed Trebalsi was quoted in the international press as saying that, although the UGTT regretted the cancellation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation was to blame for poor coordination. However, in a press release, the three European NGOs sponsoring the event said "the organizers are convinced that the only reasonable explanation for this turn of events was the intervention of the Tunisian authorities. This is not the first time that freedom of expression and assembly have been grossly violated in Tunisia in recent times, in particular concerning independent activities of civil society. The organizers are shocked by this incomprehensible action of the Tunisian authorities."

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An "Amazing Echo" in Europe  
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¶8. (C) According to Philippe, the GOT's blocking action is creating "an amazing echo" throughout the region and in European capitals. He outlined the following steps that the EU and its member states have taken or will be taking in response to the incident:

-- The German Ambassador to Tunis hosted a lunch at his residence for the two individuals whose participation in the conference had prompted the GOT to block the conference --

Khemais Chemmari and Habib Guiza;

-- The Spanish Ambassador to Tunis expressed his "dissatisfaction" over the turn of events to the MFA DG for European Affairs, who reportedly pled ignorance.

-- There is agreement among the EU members that when they gather with the Foreign Minister for their biannual luncheon on the occasion of the changing of the guard of the EU Presidency, this matter would be on the agenda (to take place December 2006/January 2007); and

-- There will be a "Troika" demarche protesting the GOT action to the Tunisian Ambassador in Brussels. This will be accompanied with the release of a public statement summarizing the EU protest (to take place "within the next days").

Philippe said that he expected a delegation of six Tunisian civil society activists who were currently visiting the European Parliament to discuss Tunisian human rights issues, to also protest the cancellation of the conference.

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Comment  
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19. (C) The GOT's last minute cancellation of this international conference underscores its overriding desire to exercise complete control over political activity, or in this case, even potentially political activity, since the conference topic was not political in nature. The GOT has a long track record of stifling freedom of association by pressuring hotel managers to deny space to unauthorized or politically sensitive groups or events. It also has a long history of denying authorization for, or interfering in, internationally sponsored events, including MEPI events, which it cannot control to its satisfaction. We find it curious, however, that the GOT would resort to such tactics

in this instance -- a high-profile, European-backed conference representing the culmination of a multi-year process. It is not clear whether the GOT simply underestimated the extent of the EU reaction, or calculated that European resolve, already challenged by intra-EU differences over how hard to press Tunisia on human rights, would fail to coalesce. One thing is clear: In the absence of a strong EU reaction, we can expect similar GOT antics in the future. It is thus all the more important that the U.S.-EU reform dialogue continue, building on the September 6 USG/EU DVC, to create opportunities for joint responses to this kind of GOT behavior.

BALLARD